

Desire for Control in Romantic Relationships

Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" was written during the mid-nineteenth century, with the actual Duke of Ferrara being the speaker. As the title of the poem suggests, the Duke speaks about his late wife, the Duchess. He makes mention of how the late Duchess greatly offended and upset him because "she thanked men" (31) with the same smile she gave to him. The examples that he gives to demonstrate how she is overly friendly with other men suggest that the Duke himself is the one being overly anything. The Duke is jealous and possessive, wanting his Duchess to show gratitude and admiration only for him. His jealousy becomes anger and he admits, "I gave command; / Then all smiles stopped together" (l.45). Through this confession, Browning is able to demonstrate the desire for control that the Duke had to have over the Duchess. Thus, the reader is able to see that the poem is actually about the lengths that the Duke will go to in order to obtain total control of his partner.

Although the title makes mention of the Duchess and the Duke of Ferrara speaks of her through most of the poem, she is only an object of the past that the Duke now has complete control over. In the opening of the poem, the Duke draws back a curtain to reveal the portrait of the late Duchess that he commissioned to be painted prior to her death. He openly boasts that "I call That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands / Worked busily a day, and there she stands" (ll.2-4). He goes on to mention the painter's name a few more times, hoping to bring light to the fact that he can afford such a painting by an acclaimed artist. He is so impressed with his ownership of the painting that he asks his audience, the family representative of his soon to be wife, "Will't please you sit and look at her?" (l.5), thus showing the reader how deep his arrogance runs. This statement can only leave one to wonder why the Duke, seeing this painting as such a prized possession, keeps it concealed. The Duke wants it known that by owning the portrait, and by being the only man that can

reveal it, he is now in control of who may view his late wife. Since the Duke was unable to control the Duchess while she was living, the portrait affords the Duke the opportunity to have control of her in death.

Just as the portrait of the Duchess was used to satisfy a desire for control, the speaker in Gabriel Spera's poem "My Ex-Husband" uses a picture of her ex-husband to fill her similar desire. In comparison to Browning's poem, both poems open with the speaker bringing attention to their past partner. Spera has the speaker in his poem as a woman discussing her late husband, who is not dead, but rather the woman has left and divorced him. Unlike the Duke, the woman does not commission an artist to paint a portrait of her spouse but took a picture with her spouse's camera. This is yet another way that Spera shows that the woman wants to be in control. By having the woman take the picture with the camera of her choice, the reader is able to see how important it was to the woman to make sure the picture was exactly as she wanted. In contrast to the Duke, the woman does not want to keep the photograph concealed; in fact she places it on a shelf for all to see. Even though he is her ex-husband, she will forever be in control of the way in which he is seen by others. The woman goes on to tell of how she put the photograph of her ex-husband in a picture frame that was a wedding gift. By admitting to her audience that she feels using the frame was "Kind of a shame / to waste it on him, but what could I do? / (Since I haven't got a photograph of you)" (ll.4-6), the reader becomes aware that her audience is ironically her new love interest. In mentioning that she is without a picture of the new man in her life, the woman is trying to take control of how and when she receives the pictures she so obviously wants from him. The speakers in both poems are trying to instill control over their future romantic partner, by impressing upon their audience the control that they have forcibly taken over their past spouse.

For both speakers, their marriages come to end when they feel they are unable to control the wandering eye of their significant other. Neither give direct proof of infidelity to the reader, and yet are quick to say reconciliation was not an option. The Duke felt that any conversation regarding "Just this Or that in you disgusts me" (l.38) would only lead to the Duchess making promises to change and to him lowering himself to giving her an

opportunity to fail him again. He feels that being married to him, having his name, should have been reason enough for the Duchesses to find joy in only him. Likewise in "My Ex-Husband," the woman says she refuses to carry on a conversation in marriage counseling where she would be forced to say "Everything he does disgusts, the lout" (l.35), for that would leave her feeling on the short end of things. Unlike the Duke, the woman does admit that her husband pleased her and that she felt he was a catch. However, she in the end feels that he could make any woman feel that way and that is just not acceptable. Therefore she chooses to take control of the situation, divorces her husband, and takes all valuable items from the marriage that she can. As divorce was not an accepted practice during his era, the Duke chooses to have the Duchess murdered in order to take control over his situation. After her death, he is then free to remarry and make sure that his new wife will live under his control.

It is a strange twist that in both poems, "My Last Duchess" and "My Ex-husband," the authors have the speaker's audiences be related to the newly forming romantic relationships in their lives. With no regard to how their audiences will view the way they handled the ending of their past marriages, both speakers are candidly open. The Duke implicates himself to the very person he is making arrangements with for his upcoming second marriage, thus showing that he feels justified in his actions and that if not given absolute control, he will take control by whatever means necessary. The Duke then comes full circle by ending the conversation regarding his late wife in this way: "There she stands / As if alive" (ll.46-47), showing no remorse for her passing. With a strikingly similar line, "There he grins, / Almost loveable" (ll.45-47), the woman wraps up her conversation regarding her past husband, showing no contrition. She instead shows interest in where the new beau would like to go for dinner. The woman makes it known where she would like to go, suggesting that his opinion matters, but ultimately taking back control by announcing she will drive her vehicle. Unlike the woman, the Duke makes demands after curtly wrapping up his conversation regarding his past wife. He lets it be known that he expects a dowry from the father of his soon-to-be bride, even though he really is not in need of the funds. This

shows that the Duke feels entitled and that he is going to establish control from the start of his next union.

Browning's poem may have been written during a past era, but like Spera's whose poem is written in the present, the central theme of desire for control of one's relationship is present throughout. Although many readers may not care for the Duke of Ferrara, they may find themselves thinking of a time in their own life when they felt their significant other had a wandering eye. To most, this would be an unforgivable act. Browning does little to suggest that the Duke was wrong in his actions or that he would ever be held accountable. The mere fact that the meeting regarding Duke's upcoming marriage continues even after the Duke's confession suggests that Browning felt that the Duke's actions were a justified means during his lifetime. Of course in this day and age, ending a person's life would never be an acceptable form of control of one's relationship. Thus, metaphorically, divorce has become an acceptable way for many to take control, not ending life but rather ending the lifestyle that they shared with their significant other. No matter what era, many will desire to be in control of the relationship they are involved in and will justify in their minds the ways in which they were able to obtain it.